

Florence Foster Jenkins inspires people to be their authentic selves, say actors



When Florence Foster Jenkins stepped on stage to let her voice soar to the rafters of Carnegie Hall, she was ?acutely? aware of what people's reactions were, and if they laughed, well, that was their problem.

So says Ann Smith, who brings Foster Jenkins to life this month in Theatre Aurora's production of *Glorious: The True Story of Florence Foster Jenkins, the Worst Singer in the World*.

The comedy, written by Peter Quilter, follows Jenkins, her accompanist Cosme McMoon (Tim Gernstein) and others in the larger-than-real-life woman's orbit as she wins legions of fans with her stylings that have been described as everything from ?unique? to ?awful.?

As she prepares for the curtain to rise this Thursday, April 20, one burning question Smith would have for Florence Jenkins, should she grandly sweep into the room, is a question many others might have as well.

?I would like to ask Florence if she was aware of the sounds that came out of her mouth versus the sounds that rang in her head,? says Smith. ?I think she would be willing to say, if I went to her as a fellow singer, and said, ?Florence, I feel different inside my head than when I hear it on recordings. Is that your experience??"

We won't, of course, ever know the answer, but for Smith, Foster Jenkins' experience at the end of the day was an overwhelming joy of sharing music with the world ? no matter the talents she had available to her.

?Florence is all about sharing the love,? says Smith, noting she had an awareness of Foster Jenkins' unique vocal stylings thanks to her mother for whom classical singing ?was one of her great joys.?

?She's all about heart and integrity and generosity,? Smith continues. ?I had an acting coach in New York who said, ?Play the love, it's all you need,' and I keep that in mind because Florence is so full of love. She loves what she does, she loves the people around her, she's motherly, caring, and sees potential in people they don't see in themselves.?

One person who saw the potential in Florence was McMoon, and actor Gernstein says ?dreamers? often looked up to Foster Jenkins, ?even people who were cynical.?

?Cynics couldn't help but grow to love her because of her determination,? says Gernstein. ?I hope people see that and maybe they'll find it in themselves, that they should pursue their passions and to hell with the naysayers ? no one say that I can't, but they can't say that I didn't. The biggest takeaway is to live your life without regret.?

As much as Smith embraces this philosophy in her lead performance, however, she's also very conscious that she's portraying a person who was very much real and, in many quarters, beloved. The fact that she was a real woman is first and foremost in her mind, and she doesn't want anyone to see Foster Jenkins as a ?cartoon character.?

?Florence lived, breathed and sang, and a lot of people when they hear her name think, ?Oh, right, that woman who can't sing,' but the important thing for me in interpreting her is to present her not as a caricature but as a person, that she was more than just her awful voice, more than just her dreadful sense of theatricality, the over-the-top costumes and the whole bit.

?None of us was there to see her. It's up for debate whether Florence was completely oblivious to the fact she couldn't sing. We all sound different in our heads. I sound way better inside my head than I do in recordings. I think I sound like Mickey Mouse. It could be that Florence simply didn't hear what she sounded like. She was also an intelligent woman, so did she see the reaction? Yes, she did. How she ascribed that, I don't know because I wasn't there. Certain people portray her a certain way. Being an actor is five-sixth being a detective and determining what it is the writer has put forth and how do I massage that and put it back out there as a rounded character?

?I want people to understand that this woman was not a buffoon, she was not a figure of fun, although people did laugh at her. She was, in fact, a woman who loved so much that she put herself out there to be judged. It is because of the love that people grew to love her.?

To ?meet? Florence Foster Jenkins for yourself, *Glorious: The True Story of Florence Foster Jenkins, the Worst Singer in the World*, runs at Theatre Aurora on select dates and times between April 20 and 29. For more information, including tickets, visit theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3669.

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